

12 December 2021

Prophets and Kings: Isaiah and Hezekiah

Isaiah; Isaiah 30:15-18

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed God's word for a lifetime, but at the heart of nearly every message was a simple point: trust God, not your own efforts. We read Isaiah 30, verses 15-18:

¹⁵ For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:

In returning and rest you shall be saved;

in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.

But you refused ¹⁶and said,

'No! We will flee upon horses'—

therefore you shall flee!

and, 'We will ride upon swift steeds'—

therefore your pursuers shall be swift!

¹⁷ A thousand shall flee at the threat of one,

at the threat of five you shall flee,

until you are left

like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain,

like a signal on a hill.

¹⁸ Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you;

therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.

For the Lord is a God of justice;

blessed are all those who wait for him.

As we heard last week, the prophets Amos and Hosea both called for the people of the northern kingdom of Israel to return to the Lord, though in different ways. Amos called for the people to remember God's law, especially the commandment to care for the poor and helpless. Hosea called for Israel to return to covenant, like a wayward bride returning to a husband who still loves her. Neither prophet seems much concerned about national politics, but both mention in passing the looming threat of a new empire in the far north, the empire of Assyria.

But what was going on in the southern kingdom of Judah during this time? Peace, mostly. Maybe this was because Judah was smaller and less prosperous, not really worth invading, but probably mostly because they had stable leadership. Through the years of Amos and Hosea, for instance, Judah had just one king, Uzziah, who ruled a peaceful kingdom for more than half a century, and when he died the throne passed in an orderly fashion to his son Ahaz. It was in that year, the year that King Uzziah died, that a young Jerusalemite from a noble family went to the temple to worship and got more than he expected.

"In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord, lofty and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple, and smoke filled the room, and fiery messengers flew between heaven and earth, and I knew I could not look on such glory and live, but neither could I look away. I cried out, 'Surely I shall die! Who am I to look on the Lord? I am a man of unclean lips!' At my cry, one of the fire-creatures took a coal from the altar of incense, flew to me, and touched my mouth, searing away my fear, cleansing me. Then God's voice called out, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' and my own voice answered, '*Hineni!*' – Look! Me! And God looked, and he

accepted me. But it was a dark path he set before me: ‘Go and speak to this people. They have ears, but they will not hear. They have eyes, but they will not see. They have minds, but will not understand. They have hearts, but will never repent.’”

And so begins the story of Isaiah, a man sent to fail. From the moment that God singled him out, Isaiah knew that no one would ever listen to him, at least in his lifetime, because that was written into his call. One of the Hebrew words for “prophecy” literally means “burden.” Isaiah knew that burden. But he bore it well. Few prophets have spoken so eloquently.

“Let me sing a song of my Beloved’s vineyard. My Beloved had a beautiful vineyard, planted and pruned, weeded and watered, guarded and tended. My Beloved did all that could be done for the vineyard he loved, and then he waited for it to bring forth fruit. But it didn’t. It produced only sour wild grapes. Thus says my Beloved: ‘I will break down the wall, uproot the vines, lay the vineyard waste.’ Hear the Lord’s word: the Beloved is our God, and Israel and Judah are the vineyard. He planted us, tended us, and then he waited for *mishpat*, justice, but there was only *mishpah*, bloodshed. He waited for *tsedekah*, righteousness, and behold, *tsa’akah*, a cry of despair.” (5:1-7)

As Amos had done in the land of Israel a generation earlier, Isaiah called for the people of Judah to return to the heart of God’s law – the law of compassion and care for the helpless. “What are your sacrifices to me, says the Lord! I’m fed up with your burnt offerings. I do not want your bulls and lambs! When did I ask for this trampling of my house! I hate your festivals: they just weary me! Don’t lift your hands to me; they’re covered with the blood of the poor. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean. Stop doing evil; learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (1:10-17)

But, of course, no one listened to him. Not the people, not the priests, and certainly not the king. King Ahaz had more pressing matters on his mind. That new empire in the north, Assyria, was on the move, and that meant trouble. You see, in the Ancient Near East there were two major centers of civilization, two areas fertile enough to support cities. One was by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers – Assyria and Babylon, in what is now Iraq – and the other was Egypt. The only road between these two population centers that had enough water to support an army went straight through Israel and Judah. So empires looking for conquests were never good news for Palestine. Assyria was looking south toward Egypt, and the word had come to Ahaz that Israel in the north and its old enemy Syria – which is different from *Assyria* – had formed an alliance against the Assyrians. Now they were sending an “invitation” to King Ahaz to join their alliance, an invitation along the lines of, “Join us, or we’ll attack you first.” So King Ahaz was weighing his options: throw his lot in with Israel and Syria, make an alliance with Egypt to the south, or maybe something else. The king was pondering this question one day as he walked the streets of Jerusalem when a figure stopped him: it was Isaiah. “Listen, O king. Do not stir, rest in the strength of the Lord, and do not trust yourself to Israel or Syria. Make no alliance. Those two kings are doomed. Their nations will not stand. They are like burning sticks; if you lean on them, they’ll crumble to ash. Trust in God instead. If you don’t stand on faith in God, you won’t stand at all. Do you want a sign? See that young woman? She will bear a son, whom she will name Immanuel – God is with us – and before that child is able to eat solid food, both Syria and Israel will be gone!” (7:1-17)

The curse of Isaiah’s call held true. King Ahaz didn’t listen. Instead he stripped the temple treasury bare of gold and silver and sent it to Tiglath-pileser, king of Assyria, basically

hiring a big bully to protect him from two smaller bullies. Ahaz preferred trusting in alliances to trusting in God, but for a little while his strategy worked. Tiglath-pileser moved south and destroyed Syria, and a few years later his successor, King Shalmaneser finished the job by utterly destroying Israel. The ten tribes that made up the nation of Israel were slaughtered or relocated to other parts of the Assyrian Empire. Captive peoples from other parts of the empire were moved into the land conquered by Joshua. Of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, only two tribes remained – Judah and Benjamin – clustered in the tiny nation of Judah, all that was left of the empire established by David and Solomon.

Meanwhile, King Ahaz had died, and his son Hezekiah had come to the throne. And Hezekiah – you’re not going to believe this – decided he was going to follow the God of Israel. He removed all the shrines to other gods that his father, and even his grandfather, had quietly chosen not to notice. He supported the priests, paid to refurbish the temple, and restored the long-forgotten festival called the Passover, which had not been observed in centuries. Hezekiah even listened, occasionally, to the words of the prophet Isaiah. Occasionally.

Just not in political matters. Isaiah’s consistent message to the king was the same he had given Ahaz: Trust in God. Do not trust in arms and armor. Do not trust in alliances. Stand with God, or you will not stand at all. Hezekiah admired the prophet, but that was just crazy. Assyria was only impressed with strength, not with how much one trusted in God. When a new king came to the throne of the Assyrian Empire – King Sennacherib – Hezekiah sent messengers to Egypt to explore making an alliance with them. The Egyptians were known for their horses and chariots, and Hezekiah wanted some of that power on his side. It was at this point that Isaiah spoke the words that we read earlier in the service, from Isaiah chapter 30: “In returning and rest you shall be saved, in quietness and trust shall be your strength. But you wouldn’t listen. You wanted horses. You wanted arms. And so you will be overthrown. Your own efforts will never be enough. Just turn to the Lord. Just trust. The Lord is waiting to be gracious to you. Blessed are those who wait for the Lord.”

Well, Assyria heard about the messengers to Egypt and they headed toward Judah. One by one they knocked off the cities of Judah until they got to Jerusalem and camped outside the walls, hurling taunts at Hezekiah. “What, do you think your God is going to protect you?” they laughed. “You mean like all the other gods that all the other people have prayed to? Oh, wait, we forgot! We killed all those people and burned their gods! Like we’ll do to you, because we’re Assyria, and you’re a bug to step on. Never mind. Don’t bother praying, after all.”

Hezekiah came down from the city wall. Going into his palace, he sent for his closest advisors. He said, “Go get Isaiah.”

When the prophet arrived, the king looked up at him with aching eyes. “I screwed up, didn’t I?”

“Mm-hm. But with God there is no such thing as too late. Are you ready to trust him now?” Hezekiah nodded. “Then ask. He likes to be asked. One thing you can count on with God: he, at least, always listens.”

Hezekiah knelt and prayed. “God? Lean close, I beg you. Look at where we are. We are your people, and we are in trouble. Help. It is true that the Assyrians have destroyed everything before them. It is true that they have reduced all other nations’ gods to ash and rubble. But those

weren't gods. Only you are. You're the one who created all that is, the one who sits above the cherubim. You are the one who hears the cry of the distressed. Today let the nations see that you are different. Save us."

That night a plague swept through the Assyrian siege camp, and when morning came, the army was decimated. King Sennacherib withdrew to regroup and, hearing a rumor that Egypt was coming, he retreated with what was left of his army back to his capital at Nineveh, where he would be safe. There he was assassinated by two of his sons. Assyria never did get back to Judah. For once, someone listened to Isaiah and simply trusted God, and by that trust Hezekiah saved God's people.

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A final word: It is no easier to simply trust God now than it was in the age of marauding empires. I spent several hours this past week attending denominational ZOOM meetings and filling out incomprehensible paperwork so as to protect the United Methodist Church from the modern Assyrians: personal injury lawyers. At no point in any of those discussions did anyone suggest that we should just trust God. Nor, in fact, did I. So I have no standing from which to criticize Ahaz and Hezekiah and their alliances. But I do at least wonder: what would happen if we took Isaiah seriously? Or, for that matter, God.

In returning and rest you will be saved.
In quietness and trust will be your strength . . .
The Lord is waiting to be gracious to you . . .